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ABSTRACT

Using W. Brockriede's model of constructs, experience, and argument, this paper shows how teacher-student communication can be enhanced through the application of the principles of rhetoric. Following a brief introduction, the first part of the paper deals with the centrality of rhetoric to the education process, then discusses rhetoric as method. The second part of the paper examines Brockriede's model and explores its implications for teaching. The paper concludes that the rhetorical approach to teaching at all levels holds the promise of developing students who are not disaffected by the lack of relevance of the classroom experience, but who are involved with their learning because it is important to their lives. (FL)

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The Art of Learning, the Art of Teaching and the Art of Rhetoric: A Modern Trivium

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that rhetoric provides the basic mechanism for successful classroom communication in that rhetoric provides a method of integrating subjects to enhance understanding of the world as a meaningful whole. Through analysis and application of Brockriede's model of constructs, experience and argument, it is argued that a rhetorical model of pedagogy should be adopted at all levels of education because such an approach provides students with the essential tools for learning effectively in a highly complex and changing environment.

"We are equal to all we can understand." --Gerald Johnson

Since the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, we have been painfully aware of the unfortunate, in fact, dangerous decline in the effectiveness of our educational system. The National Commission on Excellence in Education made specific recommendations to begin amelioration of the problem such as a Back to Basics curriculum; higher expectations and standards by institutions preparing teachers; more homework and longer school days and years; higher salaries and longer contracts for teachers; and higher standards of competence in subject area and teaching skills for teachers (Chronicle of Higher Education 13-15). All of these reflect what are essentially organizational issues which are clearly important, but do not address directly the problem of how teachers and students go about the task of making sense of the world which is what education is designed to aid us in doing.

In the communication literature, most writers have examined pedagogy specifically in light of the teaching of rhetoric and related communication skills (Brockriede, 1966; Holmberg, 1981; Kneupper, 1983; Katula and Martin, 1984). This essay, however, examines the use of rhetoric in teaching in general--regardless

of the subject matter or level.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest how understanding can be enhanced in the teacher/learner relationship through application of principles of rhetoric. The model employed is Wayne Brockriede's configuration of constructs, experience and argument (Brockriede, 1985). Part I of this essay will deal with the centrality of rhetoric to the educational process and rhetoric as method. Part II will examine Brockriede's model and discuss its implications for teaching that meet the goals of society and individual learners.

PART I

The Centrality of Rhetoric

In 1947, responding to a feeling among the British population similar to that we have about our educational system, Dorothy L. Sayers suggested that the solution lay in the past rather than untested, unknown future. Sayers outlined the same questions we have been asking of our own system: Why is a literate society so susceptible to advertisement and propaganda? Why cannot the average person debate issues competently? Why do "subjects" remain subjects for our students, never to be connected in their minds? She concluded, "Is not the great defect of our education today... that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects', we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: They learn everything

except the art of learning" (Sayers 2). The solution, Sayers suggests, lies in the mediaeval Trivium of Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric for these were not "subjects", but tools for learning. "Modern education," she wrote, "concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along; mediaeval education concentrated on first forging and learning to handle the tools of learning..." (3). Her argument is that the mediaeval method produced the kind of person who was able to deal with the world-at-large; to deal with the task of making a whole of the parts and thus live a more integrated, satisfying and effective life as a citizen. The ostensible goals of our modern public system are "to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society..." (2).

To accomplish this task, I argue that it is important that all teachers, regardless of subject area, be knowledgeable of and competent in the use of rhetoric. I mean this to go beyond the use of rhetoric simply as a tool to organize and deliver material in the classroom, but as an organizing system of all knowledge; to integrate the various subjects with which each student is grappling. Donald C. Bryant suggested:

> As we are teachers, and as we are taught, we are involved with rhetoric. The success of the venture depends on a deliberate or instinctive adjustment of idea through speaker to audience in a particular situation. Pedagogy is the rhetoric of teaching, whether formally in the classroom or book, or informally in the many incidental situations of our days and nights. (Bryant 15-16).

Rhetoric, for Bryant, is the central focus of the art of teaching in all contexts. Byrant goes on to suggest that it is more than a means of teaching, but is essential to the attainment of the goal that Sayers so clearly articulated:

> Rhetoric...is the function in human affairs which governs and gives direction to that creative activity, that process of critical analysis, that branch of learning, which address themselves to the whole phenomenon of the designated use of language for the promulgation of information, ideas and attitudes (Bryant 19; Cf. Fisher, 1984 4).

For a society to fit its people "to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society" rhetoric provides the tools for critical analysis of information, ideas and values.

I think we do do a good job of transmitting information. Students are attuned to "facts", absorb facts, want facts, but, unfortunately, have little idea that those facts often have moral implications; or if that is somehow dimly apprehended, lack the skills for determining how to handle the facts in the best way. Eubanks and Baker articulated the problem:

> One of the most poignant truths of the present human situation is its axiological impotence.... Abraham Maslow wrote: 'The ultimate disease of our time is valuelessness.'... Richard M. Weaver warned: 'We approach a condition in which we shall be amoral without the capacity to perceive it and degraded without means to measure our descent'. (Eubanks and Baker 341)

Educationally, we have been lacking a center; we have shied away from teaching students what is right and good and focused on an "impartial" and "objective" smorgasbord of facts (Cf. Rhodes 4-5). "American liberal education has thus neglected its crucial responsiblity," echo Eubanks and Baker, "for transmitting knowledge about and faith in abiding human values--for helping man with the problem of what he will do with his 'burden of freedom'" (342).

For a truly educated citizenry, one capable of making sound decisions regarding public policy, a new direction in education is needed. We need an integrated approach that looks beyond the discrete facts; one that provides perspective in making sense of the world facing the student. A rhetorical model of education "will tend to show that all knowledge is one" (Sayers 7).

Rhetoric as Method

The first component of the new Trivium, the tools for learning, is rhetoric functioning to provide a means of integrating subjects into a consistent and meaningful whole. Rhetoric also provides a set of artistic pedagogical principles by which the art of learning can be facilitated. As Sayers

suggested, and as Donald Bryant agreed (Bryant 10), rhetoric is a method by which subjects are analyzed, and synthesized and evaluated. In other words, rhetoric provides a means by which the highest levels of thinking, as identified by Bloom, are done. These too are the important levels of thinking for it is at these levels that all science and art progress. Not to move to these cognitive levels stagnates creativity and knowledge for no new knowledge is created at levels below them. Not only does rhetoric provide a method of investigation in the "scientific" sense, it also provides a means of dealing with value-judgements, and deciding actions in areas of uncertainty. Bryant stated:

> Rhetoric...is the method, the strategy. the organon of the principles for deciding best the undecideable questions, for arriving at solutions of the unsolvable problems, for instituting method in those vital phases of human activity where no method is inherent in the total subject matter of decision. (11).

Thus, it seems, rhetoric provides the means for learning; for structuring our investigations of both the scientific and artistic areas of human knowledge. The problem we have been faced with in modern educational practice is a loss of this unifying practice, this art of teaching, and have lost contact with an integrating, unifying method of teaching. Bryant concluded:

> The plain truth is that whatever the inadequacies in specific cases of the analytical method

> ingrained in our educational ancestors, they <u>had</u> method, the method of formal rhetoric; whereas a general characteristic of our contemporary education is that it inculcates <u>no</u> method beyond a rather uncertain grammar and a few rules of paragraphing and bibliography.... [T]he widespread impotence and ineptitude even of our best educated fellows when faced with the problem of constructing or analyzing any but the most rudimentary expository or argumentative discourse, much less a complicated literary work are surely worse. (30)

Bryant has correctly characterized the general understanding of rhetoric in our present educational scheme as being relegated to a few rules of composition. Its centrality to the endeavor of knowledge acquisition is long gone and its ability to train the mind in argument is only a shadow left in those "few rules."

Although the mediaeval method became somewhat ossified and irrelevant, it nevertheless did train minds to think. And although our style of education has changed, modern educators still have rhetoric available to them. Wayne Brockriede suggested in 1968 a wider conception of rhetoric that fits well with present educational practice. He attempted to expand the concept of rhetoric to include interpersonal relationships (Brockriede,1968 2). Such concepts as liking, power and distance in <u>relationships</u>; central ideas and ideology in the <u>function</u> of choosing; and the <u>situational</u> dimensions of format, channel, people, functions, method and contexts are treated (2-11). Such a conception of rhetoric is directly applicable to education at all levels. Its humanistic perspective is compatable with present philosophies of classroom practice and informs the educator methodologically in the conception,

transmission and interpretation of his/her own messages as well as the students'. Rhetoric clearly has its place in the classroom and is compatible with present practice.

Since not all communication in the classroom is rhetorical in the sense of creating knowledge, educators who have had little practice with the concept of rhetoric as epistemic need some means of recognizing those contexts that allow students to move beyond the knowledge, comphrehension and application levels of Bloom's taxonomy. I suggest three criteria posed by Cherwitz (1977). First, he suggested that, "rhetoric must be viewed as an activity of correction, wherein the clash of contradictory ideas exposes error and yields truth" (217). This can be done as soon as students are ready developmentally. Students need to be encouraged to struggle with each others' ideas, to test their own and those of others; to develop a healthy skepticism as well as a means of structuring what they believe to be true in a cogent and compelling fashion. Second, Cherwitz suggests that, "Unless a person who decides to argue enters an agreement freely allowing his opponent to criticize and correct him, there is no assurance that truth will emerge" (218). The classroom needs to be a supportive environment that allows a testing of ideas that implies mutual "risk" to the students and instructor. A genuine commitment must be made by all (including the teacher) to discover and adhere to the best ideas or the use of rhetoric as method will not only function poorly, but will be damaging to the participants. Therefore, Cherwitz stipulates, "most

importantly, unless rhetoric functions as an enterprise of person-risking and person-building, there can be no guarantee that attempts to gain adherence will yield knowledge" (218). The two movements of person-risking and person-building must happen simultaneously such that students and instructor must be willing to put their ideas on the line (they must actually say something disclosive) and such statements must be treated with utmost care and respect by auditors. If students are fearful of speaking disclosively, important ideas will never be heard, understood, tested, corrected or accepted. Without such talk, the kind of gains envisioned by Sayers and Bryant will be impossible. We will be doomed to continue to live in a world of discrete facts and moral ahedonia.

In sum, I believe we can say about all education what Brockriede said of pedagogy in communication:

> If, as I think, rhetoric and not orality is the essential common feature which unifies our discipline, then pedagogically as well as theoretically, that commonality should be explored. An investigation of rhetoric as the synthesis of our pedagogy might lead to radical revisions of curricula and teaching methods..." (Brockriede, 1966 40).

PART II

A Model for Pedagogy

Dorothy L. Sayers correctly described our approach to education as the teaching of "subjects". We have torn each subject from all others for the purpose of organization and the result is a fragmented view of the world by students, often an inability to recognize the complexity of the world around them, and consequently an inability to think meaningfully about that system. In my own teaching, I have often had students question why we discuss philosophy, ethics, politics, science and religion in a course called Interpersonal Communication. One student told me that if he wanted philosophy, he'd have signed up for a philosophy course. He felt I was not teaching the "subject" he wanted, failing to recognize the interrelatedness of symbol using and the nature of man. Other students, reacting from the same basic assumptions, but more positively, are often delighted to learn that there <u>are</u> connections to be made in this "bloomin', buzzing confusion" and find their learning energized by that insight.

To this point I have suggested that the modern "trivium" requires a new focus on the art of learning and the art of teaching. Now I turn to Brockriede's model to suggest a means for applying the art of rhetoric to the task of knowledge creation in the classroom. Application of such an approach will

allow students to integrate both their approach to learning and the interpretation of the world they develop through the process of learning. Brockriede's model is presented in Figure 1.

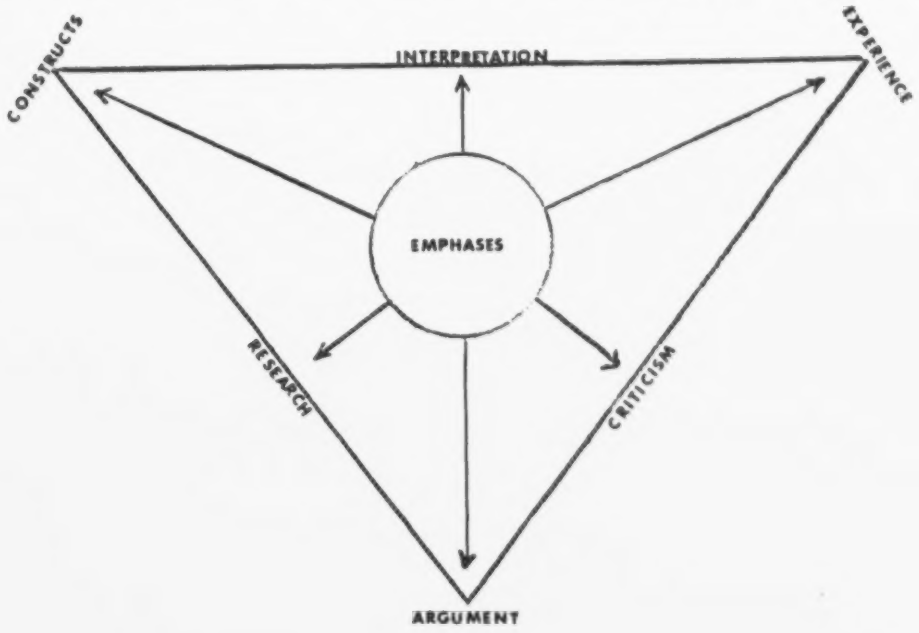

FIGURE 1

First, one must understand that the approach Brockriede takes is perspectivist. That is to say, that this theory recognizes that everything is related to everything else (Brockriede, 1985 153). This approach applies not only the model, but the effect use of the model may have as one approaches the world. It discourages (although does not disallow) reductionism; it encourages understanding any concept, idea, event, person or process as "an inviolable whole" (153). Through perspectivism understanding is accomplished while clearly showing the complexity of the world, thus discouraging simple answers to complex questions. Through this rhetorical

approach, one will be able to better integrate one's knowledge of the world. When using the model, of course, any one of the dimensions or relationships will be focused upon becoming the foreground and the others making up the background. Perspectivism provides a "strategy of emphasis" (153) that allows focus without disjunction.

The scope of the model is persons, things and language. The personal dimension "thematizes who persons are, how they relate to one another, how they construe things through language, how they interpret their experience,and how they argue" (153). The implications for teaching are numerous: the focus is on the person in the classroom who is attempting to advance or clarify an idea, be it teacher or student; the interpersonal dimension of teacher/student and student/student relationships becomes important as they become jointly engaged in the puzzle-solving process rather than competing; insight will be gained by the instructor as to how the students really see the world and interpret it giving opportunity for correction, exposing error and yielding truth (Cherwitz 217). Argument becomes a focal point of the process. Students who are asked to provide good reasons for their beliefs will be forced to move beyond the lower levels of the taxonomy and create new knowledge that will be, in fact, theirs,creating, too, a commitment to that body of knowledge. The empirical dimension "features messages and behaviors to be construed and argued about, as well as methods designed to make sense of them" (Brockiede, 1985 153). For the

educator, this provides data on student progress and also provides a new focus on quality of thinking rather than an inventory of the number of discrete facts a student can consume. Finally, the linguistic dimension involves words about words. For the teacher, this allows analysis of topics and/or student talk to be made at various levels from the microscopic grammatical level to the highly abstract, macroscopic level of world-views.

According to Brockriede, understanding is the featured function of the model (154). Understanding needs to be understood in two senses: first, it "implies that persons come to comprehension of constructs and experience through arguing and by means of processes of research in addition to that one, admittedly useful, set of procedures sometimes called the scientific method" (154). This contextualizes what is often a reified method as a means of investigation and allows for other kinds of investigation that are equally productive (See P.B. Medawar's essay, "Scians"). Second, "Understanding is to be construed...as an ontological exposition of what 'is' and as an axiological conception of what 'ought to be,' i.e., as descriptive and normative" (154). This conception then focuses more on the making of significant decisions regarding right action at the personal and societal levels. Such a focus would more likely produce citizens "fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom."

In examining the first of the three dimensions, Brockriede notes constructs are similar to George Kelly's notion of a way individuals make sense of experience (Brockriede 155). But he goes on to suggest that constructs can also be held collectively, much like Kuhn's idea of paradigm. Brockriede wrote, "constructs...refer to ideas that have evolved collectively over time and have gained the adherence of a community of scholars by processes of interpreting experience and making research arguments" (155). It is important for the educator to realize the rhetorical nature not only of one's classroom activities, but also the rhetorical nature of the very body of knowledge conveyed to students. This insight allows us to approach education as the uncovering of "the most important collective constructs in that field of study" (155). To do so would be to de-mystify much of the authority of textbooks and would serve to minimize the focus on the learning of discrete facts, thus rescuing "students from the tedious task of learning by experience, one context at a time" (155).

The second dimension of the model is experience. Our daily experiences are important or unimportant to us as they are filtered through constructs related to that experience (156). This complex relationship has implications for teaching. Brockriede wrote:

> Experience of rhetorical communication [classroom talk included] can be construed broadly as involving relational, actional, and situational dimensions.... Relational dimensions include such

> themes as attraction, power, distance, and trust. Actions include goals, tasks, ideas, decisions, attitudes, ideologies and motives. Situations can be construed in a macroscopic sense as a holistic environment in which relations and actions take place, or in a more microscopic sense as a specified context of time and place in which communicative experiences occur.(156)

The relational dimensions focus our attention on the interpersonal character of classroom communication. Actions feature content that is the true focus of instruction. Situations demand, for understanding, a holistic approach (which is the genius of a rhertorical model such as this) and allows microscopic analysis, i.e., criticism. Thus, the rhetorical experience inherent in the classroom is "constituted by interactions of interpersonal relations, actions and situations: Persons relate to one another through symbolic action in a situation" (156).

The third dimension of Brockriede's model is argument. According to Brockriede, "Persons may focus on arguing as discourse (1) involving one or more inferential leaps, (2) making choices among competing claims, (3) risking confrontation, (4) promoting a perceived rationale, (5) regulating uncertainties, and (6) sharing among persons of overlapping frames of reference. In essence, argument should serve as the centerpiece of all learning for the kind of education that will allow our citizens "to reach some common understanding on complex issues, often on short notice and on the basis of conflicting or incomplete evidence" (Chronicle of Higher Education 11). If this is in fact our goal, and if

Bryant's suggestion that rhetoric is the method of deciding, then it follows that a rhetorically based pedagogy is demanded and argument is the heart of rhetoric.

Finally, we must turn to the relationships among the dimensions. Interpretation, criticism and research make up the activities that actually grow out of the dimensions.

Interpretation grows out of the interaction of constructs and experience. In the classroom, a focus on constructs to the exclusion of experience makes education impractical, disconneted and irrelevant. A focus on experience without constructs makes the world a confusing world of discrete, unconnected facts; a seeming senseless, random, and unpredictable world. Educators must realize students are interpretive beings (157) and our task is to make clear the relationship of constructs and experience so students can inhabit an intellectually meaningful world.

Criticism is the act that grows out of the relationship of experience and argument. It is the analytical task of making sense of experience through "interpretive explanation" (158). Educators then must be open to a variety of points of view regarding the nature of the topic(s) being studied at any one time. Such an approach would temper the focus on the discovery of "right" and "wrong" answers and focus on arguments. To go back, again, to our stated educational objective of developing thinkers who "can come to some understanding" based on "conflicting and incomplete evidence", we must no longer focus on either/or and begin requiring of our students arguments

"presenting a legitimate and interesting point of view" (159).

This focus on argument is necessitated in the final relationship between constructs and argument: research. As Brockriede correctly noted, "Whatever the process of amassing data of experience and relating them to appropriate constructs, whatever the mode of analysis...research investigators advance claims" (159). The reason is that in "the research process, persons try to enhance the understanding of constructs for other persons. The method they use is argument" (161). Once this reality is understood, we will, and hopefully our students will see the exciting nature of research. The classroom will become a research laboratory that generates theory of its own. Real-life will be confronted in the classroom and the search by students for the "facts" that are "right" will no longer be their focus. Rather, a search for a legitimate explanation for what has been experienced, to be presented in a cogent argument submitted for criticism will become the focus.

CONCLUSION

A rhetorical approach to teaching, teaching at all levels, holds the promise of developing students who are not disaffected by the irrelevance of the classroom, but thinkers who are involved with their learning because it will be their learning, and it will be relevant to their lives. The school will become a testing ground for students as they work at making sense of

the world that confronts them. The kinds of issues dealt with, and the kind of explanations offered, I suspect, would certainly be surprising. The reason that students, during the Middle Ages, went to the university at age sixteen, argues Sayers, is not because they necessarily had less to learn, but that they were at that point equipped to learn through their study of the trivium. To accomplish the educational goals we have set for ourselves requires that we provide the tools for learning in a highly complex society. Times have changed since the Middle Ages, but the needs of students have not. A new trivium is now in order: we ought now focus on the art of learning, and the art of teaching through the art of rhetoric.

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